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***Politics Gone Viral:***

***Social Media and Political Mobilization***

*In what respects are social media effective tools for initiating political mobilization and stimulating political change in order to challenge authoritarian regimes?*

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A minor dissertation submitted in *partial fulfillment* of the requirements for the award of the degree of Masters of Social Science in Political Studies

**COMPULSORY DECLARATION**

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## **Abstract**

*In what respects are social media effective tools for initiating political mobilization and stimulating political change in order to challenge authoritarian regimes?*

The rise of new media have continued to have a profound effect on the global political system. Social media in particular have seen an exponential increase in penetration globally. The recent Arab uprisings that began in 2010 across the MENA region have challenged authoritarian resilience which has been a prominent feature of the region for several decades. This project examines the rise of social media and their effects on the political system, specifically the role played by social media in undermining the power of authoritarian regimes. Traditionally authoritarian regimes have used many methods in order to maintain power. These have included: maintaining a strong coercive apparatus, the strategic introduction of certain institutions and the role of traditional legitimacy, and/or charismatic or personalistic leadership. This dissertation considers whether the use of social media has changed the balance of power within states enabling citizens to overthrow their authoritarian leaders. Two case studies; Tunisia and Syria are analysed to show the effects of social media on the political uprisings in both nations.

**Keywords:** social media, authoritarian regimes, Arab Spring, Network Theory

## **Chapter 1**

### *Introduction*

The founder of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg, recently announced a historic milestone. "Facebook is now used by 1 billion people every month, or one in every seven people in the world" (Kiss, 2012). To put this in perspective, if Facebook were a country it would be the third largest country in the world after China and India. "Facebook has recorded 1.13 trillion "Likes", 140.3 billion friend connections and 219 billion shared photos since it launched in February 2004. More than 300 million photos are uploaded every day and 62.6 million songs played" (Kiss, 2012). These figures represent how extensive the use of Facebook has become in today's world. Social media in general have seen a profound increase in membership world-wide; other popular social media sites include Twitter, LinkedIn and YouTube.

"Social media represent a revolutionary new trend"(Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010: 59). This trend is having a profound impact on the international system and it is crucial that the impact of social media are analysed in order to gain a better understanding of the effects they are having specifically in the political arena. It is clear by the growing levels of internet access across the globe as well as the increasing membership of social media sites that this new development represents an important change that needs further analysis. It is clear that from election campaigns to political protests; social media sites are already having an effect and have changed the political landscape. Citizens across the world can communicate and interact with one another in completely new ways.

The recent information and technological revolution has changed the way in which people interact, communicate and share information. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and other social networking sites which were once purely sites of private diversion and a way for old and new friends to connect are now viewed as "...vehicles that allow ordinary people to enter and influence many arenas of public life" (Auer, 2011: 709). It is clearly evident from several topical examples that social media sites are

having an impact on politics both nationally and internationally. This is most clearly evident in the use of social media in the on-going revolutionary movements across North Africa and the Middle East (MENA) which began in December 2010 as well as its use in the 2012 US Election.

Social media allows citizens to communicate, debate, share video and photographs across distances of both space and time. The web is providing entirely new tools and resources to track and cover world politics. Web 2.0 is the base upon which social media were built and these social media sites have provided a new way in which large sectors of the population participate in politics (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010: 61). The key differentiating factor in terms of these new media is their highly interactive quality. The original uses of the internet include the more traditional web page format which allows users to only access information. These are referred to as unidirectional platforms and they are similar to traditional media such as newspapers and television. Social media platforms on the other hand are multi-directional or interactive (Himmelboim, Lariscy, Tinkham, & Sweetser, 2012: 95). Users can participate in debates and can share information.

The internet itself is a relatively new development which has revolutionised how people communicate, how businesses market themselves and do business and it has made large amounts of information more readily accessible to a greater demographic. Social media has taken these new developments to new heights by giving people the opportunity to generate and share information themselves. Social media sites are responsible for transforming the World Wide Web into a platform that facilitates information exchange between users (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010: 60). "In the twenty-first century, the proliferation of electronic social media portals, such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and LinkedIn, are new, powerful communication tools capable of influencing users' opinions in the realms of politics and policy" (Auer, 2011:709). Technological enhancements in media, communications and the internet have enabled us to reach this point and it is clear that social media are only going to play an even bigger role in people's lives in the future.

In addition, “new information and communication technologies (ICTs) are changing the ways in which activists communicate, collaborate and demonstrate” (Garrett, 2007: 202). Due to this effect many authors have identified new media, specifically social media, as being instrumental in the recent protests in the Middle East and North African region colloquially referred to as the Arab Spring. Social Media sites such as Facebook have influenced and changed the way in which ordinary citizens can communicate with one another and this is particularly evident in the use of such new technologies to spread awareness of the plight of others as well as mobilize and organize mass protest against repressive regimes in the Arab region. According to Shirky social media have become a fact of life for civil society everywhere. “The world’s networked population has greater access to information, more opportunities to engage in public speech, and an enhanced ability to undertake collective action” (Shirky, 2011: 28).

The resilience of authoritarian rule has been the focus of many studies on the Arab region. Even as the third wave of democratization spread across Latin America and Southern Africa, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region experienced minimal democratic change (Bellin, 2004). Authoritarian rulers in this region maintained control through whichever means possible including brutal force. The recent uprisings across the Arab region have come as a surprise to many scholars and even the dictators themselves. These protests indicate a unique show of strength on behalf of the people. Many have praised the role of social media as the determining factor which changed the game and enabled citizens to communicate and coordinate even within a highly controlled and regulated media landscape.

Howard and Hussain (2011: 41) argue that “...opposition to authoritarian rule has been the consistent collective-action goal across the region”. An important question to be addressed is whether the Arab Spring would have occurred without the presence of social media? The root causes and reasons for dissent were present amongst the Arab citizens but social media arguably provided them with the means to communicate and coordinate with one another to rally around their common goal. For this reason an important area which needs further investigation is the challenge that the emergence of new social media is posing for authoritarian regimes. “Digital media are important precisely because they had a role in popular mobilizations



against authoritarian rule that were unlike anything seen before in the region” (Howard, & Hussain, 2011: 47).

Several countries across the international system have instituted censorship and control of social media sites as political rulers began to feel threatened by the inherent power of social media. This adds greater emphasis to the importance and power of social media. The control and censorship of the media is a rising concern among many nations. Some countries have committed themselves to internet freedom as promoted by the Global Network Initiative while others are working hard to find the most efficient way in order to monitor social media sites. Many authoritarian regimes are finding ways in which to control their citizens’ access to the internet. Some of the ways include; filtering content, monitoring online behavior, prohibiting internet use entirely, and arresting and detaining certain bloggers or internet users who have been linked to posting information against the state (Howard & Hussain, 2011: 46-47).

According to Calingaert, (2009: 64) “...the internet has increased citizens freedom of expression in countries where traditional broadcast and print media are often controlled and censored. It has increased opportunities to enrich public discourse, expose abuses of power, and facilitate citizen activism. The open nature of the internet challenges the ability of repressive regimes to thwart expressions of dissent and political oppositions”. Since this was written, in 2009, social media websites have increased in terms of their distribution and membership and the recent example of the uprisings and protests across the Arab region have shown how social media and the internet can be used to challenge the power of authoritarian regimes.

Social media have changed the way citizens participate politically. It is imperative that this new media and its effect on politics is analysed in order to better understand social media’s new role in politics. The key area of interest that this research project will focus on is the proliferation of social media and the impact this is having on political mobilization and political change in authoritarian regimes.

Social media is evidently a new way in which people can participate in politics. There are several areas of specific interest in terms of addressing this phenomenon. These

new media platforms can be a new way to bring freedom to oppressed people by giving them the means to communicate and coordinate but they can also be controlled by these repressive regimes. This research project will examine the political impact of social media and specifically its power to get people to align their interests to coordinate and protest in order to topple authoritarian rulers. The ubiquitous nature of social media means that they are difficult to control and monitor. This is proving to be a threat to authoritarian regimes.

The emergence of social media has challenged the traditional model of how authoritarian regimes remain in power. Will authoritarian rulers alter their methods in order to maintain control and will this inevitably involve a drastic overhaul of how they censor and control these new media? Alternatively, will the emergence of social media result in the final overthrow of all remaining despots, dictators and authoritarian rulers?

Even though social media are a very valuable platform for users to mobilise support, voice certain opinions and engage in healthy debate and discussion, it is also vital to take note of the limits inherent in using social media. There is the opportunity to spread misinformation through the channels of social media (Morozov, 2011b). It is 'User Generated Data' which means there are no fact-checkers to ensure all information is reliable and correct. Social media still have strong influences and it is this power that presents a crucial subject area that needs further investigation and analysis. Social media can also be used by repressive regimes to further control and watch their citizens. By monitoring social media sites and posting false information these new forms may present authoritarian regimes with an additional avenue to control their citizens. For example an incident that took place in Sudan in early 2011, shows how Facebook can be used to deceive citizens. In this specific example the authorities used Facebook and text messages to encourage protestors to gather at a particular place in Khartoum. The authorities proceeded to arrest them on arrival (Seib, 2012: 62).

There is a tendency amongst scholars to over emphasise the use of social media with regards to the toppling of authoritarian rulers. Especially in light of the

excitement which has followed the role of social media in the recent Arab Spring. It is now viewed by some as the tool to bring democratic change to the most repressive regimes. Many policy makers have made it their goal to spread media freedom across the world especially to the most repressive regimes. Howard adds an important caveat to this point of view “Technology alone does not cause political change...but it does provide new capacities and impose new constraints on political actors. New information technologies do not topple dictators they are used to catch dictators off-guard” (Howard, 2011: 12).

The research question that this project will address is based on achieving a better understanding of social media and their effects on politics and more specifically political mobilization in authoritarian regimes. The explanatory question for this research project is; in what respects are social media effective tools for initiating political mobilization and stimulating political change in order to challenge authoritarian regimes? This will be examined with reference to two cases from the recent Arab Spring; Tunisia and Syria. This explanatory question will analyse the impact of this phenomenon specifically regarding whether they are an effective tool for initiating political mobilization in order to topple authoritarian rulers.

In order to answer the question posed above this research project will analyse the current literature in terms of how authoritarian regimes traditionally maintain control in order to avert uprisings and protests amongst the citizens. This project will also examine the relatively new literature on the emergence of the internet and social media specifically how these new media are changing the political landscape in terms of how citizens receive information, communicate with one another and coordinate political protests and resistance. This project will examine these two areas within the literature to analyse how the emergence of new forms of media are challenging the conventional accounts on the maintenance of authoritarian rule.

Two theories which will be referenced in answering the question above include network theory and authoritarian theory. These theories will form an analytical framework for explaining the use of the internet and specifically social media for political mobilization. Network theory focuses on the suitability of the internet and

social media to mobilize citizens. According to Manuel Castells “the media have become the social space where power is decided” (Castells, 2007: 238). Castells has written extensively on the Network Society and particularly how the technological advancements over the past decade have changed the world we live in. “...the revolution in communication technologies has intensified in recent years therefore it is logically the realm in which society has been most profoundly modified”(Castells, 2010: 1974).

The Network Theory presented by Castells can be used to explain how the characteristics of social media make them valuable tools for political activism. Social media have the ability to create weak ties, they have a high level of anonymity and online communication is egalitarian by nature. These inherent qualities in social media provide a space for citizens to mobilise. The work of Granovetter focusses on the strength of weak ties which is their ability to introduce us to new ideas and new information, and the internet and particularly social media allow these ties to be forged over vast areas of space and time (Granovetter, 1983). Network Theory posits that the emergence of new media represents a major change to the political landscape.

The conventional account on the maintenance of authoritarian rule has been put forward by several authors (Gandhi & Przeworski, 2007; Bellin, 2004; Slater, 2003; Svoboda, 2009; Nathan, 2003). The endurance of authoritarian rule is explained by several theories including their monopoly on the coercive apparatus, strategic introduction of certain democratic institutions and the role of traditional legitimacy and/or charismatic or personalistic leadership. This research project will examine the literature on the emergence of social media and indicate how these new media are threatening some of these traditional theories.

The Arab Spring is a revolutionary movement marked by civil disobedience and violence which was spread and encouraged through the use of social media. According to Safranek (2012: 1) “there can be no doubt that information and communication technologies, in particular burgeoning social media, played a part in the upheavals”. We cannot deny the role that social media is playing in terms of providing a space where members of society can participate in political discussion

and debate, share links to political articles or cartoons and receive relevant political information.

A qualitative research design will be used to test the propositions stated above. The research project will analyse the Arab Spring where social media has been utilised to mobilise citizens to rise up against repressive regimes. This project will indicate and describe the ways in which social media have been used for political purposes and it will also enable a preliminary examination of the effectiveness of social media as a platform for mobilising political protest.

The cases which will be analysed within this research project are Tunisia and Syria. Both countries are situated in the MENA region and both are regionally significant nations; Tunisia in North Africa and Syria in the Middle East. Tunisia and Syria were both French colonies and they gained independence in 1956 and 1946 respectively. Both countries are majority Muslim nations with Arabic as their official language. Tunisia is the smallest of the North African states with a population of 10 million and Syria's population is 22 million (CIA World Fact Book).

These countries have strong similarities as well as some important differences. They have both had a long history of authoritarian leadership and were both affected politically during the recent Arab Spring. Tunisia is viewed as the catalyst and after uprisings erupted and succeeded with the toppling of President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia; similar uprisings and political protests emerged throughout the MENA region including Syria. Both uprisings were reactions to the massive physical and emotional daily suffering being felt by large portions of people living in both Tunisia and Syria (Salih, 2013). Throughout the literature social media have been highlighted as playing a significant role in the uprisings in both Tunisia and Syria (Howard & Hussain, 2011; Leenders & Heydemann, 2012; Ghannam, 2011; Shehabat, 2012; Frangonikolopoulos & Chapos, 2012; Cavatorta & Haugbølle, 2012; Hinnebusch, 2013).

These cases will be analysed in order to gain a clearer understanding of the role of social media in facilitating political mobilisations in authoritarian regimes. Amongst the confusion and conflicting opinions surrounding the role played by social media one thing which is strikingly clear is the new threat which social media poses to the stability of authoritarian regimes. How long can authoritarian leaders prevent their

citizens from being exposed to social media and not only being exposed to what is happening elsewhere in the world but also the ability to interact with other citizens nationally as well as globally?

The research method will involve an intensive study of the way in which social media were utilised in order to induce citizens to participate in politics. The research will primarily take place at the meso level as it will be analysing the behaviour of certain sectors of the population, with regards to their usage of social media within political contexts. It is imperative to clearly define the main concepts which will be referred to throughout this research project.

The definition of social media which is provided by Kaplan & Haenlein, (2010) will be utilised for the duration of this project. Social Media is defined as “a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (2010: 61). Examples of popular social media include Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, MySpace, Wikipedia, and YouTube.

The events that will be examined in this research project were part of the broader Arab Spring. The Arab Spring or Arab Awakening refers to the recent revolutionary wave of demonstrations and mass protests which occurred in the Arab region. It began in December 2010 in Tunisia, and later spread to several other Arab nations including Egypt, Libya, Syria and Yemen. This event which shook the authoritarian rulers in these nations will be the focus of the research project. Within a year since the Tunisian fruit seller set himself on fire, the act which started it all, four of the Arab world's longest standing dictators have been ousted from power. President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia was overthrown on 14 January 2011 after ruling since 1987, President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt stepped down on 11 February 2011 after ruling Egypt since 1981, Muammar el-Qaddafi of Libya was killed on 20 October 2011 after holding the ruling position since 1969 and President Ali Abdullah Saleh of Yemen signed a power transfer agreement on 23 November 2011 ending his 33 year reign. In addition many other countries within the region have experienced major anti-government protest action including Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco and Sudan. The political changes taking place within the MENA region are unprecedented and the leaders as well as political scholars, theorists and

commentators were unprepared for what has been unfolding within that region over the past four years. For decades the most compelling feature of this region was the stability and long lasting quality of the regimes. According to Gause, “most academics focused on explaining what they saw as the most interesting and anomalous aspect of Arab politics: the persistence of undemocratic rulers” (2011:81).

According to Enjolras, Steen-Johnsen, & Wollebaek, (2012) political mobilization refers to “the process by which candidates, parties, activists, and groups induce other people to participate in politics to win elections, to pass bills, to modify rulings and to influence policies”. For the purposes of this research project political mobilization will be defined as the process through which citizens or activists induce one another through the medium of the internet and social media to participate in politics and specifically with the intention of influencing politics and toppling authoritarian governments. In this sense political mobilization can be a way in which citizens organise each other to put pressure on the current government in power.

This research project will examine how social media played a role in triggering these protests and brought about the political changes across the Arab world with particular reference to Tunisia and Syria. Ultimately, it will examine how social media was used to challenge the notorious resilience of Arab authoritarianism.

## **Chapter 2**

### *Theoretical Literature Survey*

The focus of this dissertation is the rise of new forms of media specifically social media and the effects they are having on the endurance of authoritarian regimes in the Arab world. In order to understand this new phenomenon it is imperative that the literature that currently exists be examined. There are three areas of literature that need to be analysed. In this review the literature on new media particularly its emergence, development and use in politics will be examined. Secondly, the literature on authoritarian regimes will be looked at with specific focus on the endurance and stability of authoritarian regimes in the Arab region. In addition Network Theory will be described as put forward by its primary author; Manuel Castells. In the following chapters this theory will be applied to the cases under analysis.

Social Media is a recent development and its new found importance within the political realm means that there is limited research into this growing phenomenon. Many authors have identified the importance of social media specifically in its role in politics but few have given this relationship adequate attention. This section will give a brief overview of some of the main research areas that are covered in the literature on social media and its role in political mobilization and political change in authoritarian regimes. Due to the fact that the emergence of social media as well as its effect on politics is quite new the literature on these developments is relatively new but due to the growing interest into this area there has been a surge of articles concerning particularly the Arab Spring and the subsequent consequences.

The role of mass media in politics is a phenomenon which has been under the spotlight since the emergence of the printing press. These earlier forms of media had revolutionary consequences of their own. According to Shirky "Just as Luther adopted the printing press to protest against the Catholic Church, and the American revolutionaries synchronized their beliefs using the postal service that Benjamin



Franklin had designed, today's dissident movements will use any means possible to frame their views and coordinate their actions" (Shirky, 2011: 4). The past few centuries have been marked by several developments; from the telegraph, telephone, radio and television all have had radical effects at the time of their emergence. Now social media's ground breaking role in the Arab Spring are producing revolutionary effects that have shocked many around the world including many non-democratic rulers.

According to Farrell, in the future the relationship between the internet and politics will become increasingly important to analyse and understand. He states that "paradoxically, it is likely that there will be ever fewer scholars specializing in the internet and politics...this will not be because political scientists will lose interest in the internet and related technologies. Rather, it will be because these technologies will have become so integrated into regular political interactions that it will be impossible to study" (Farrell, 2012: 47). In his article he touches on some important consequences of the internet on politics. He attempts to identify a framework to study the internet. Farrell suggests the best way to study the internet is to examine the causal mechanisms. He identifies three key questions scholars have with regards to the internet and politics. These are; Does the Internet exacerbate political polarization? Does the Internet empower ordinary citizens? Can the Internet help activists to topple dictators? To answer these he suggests one focuses on the causal mechanisms; which could be the effect of the internet in terms of lowering transactions costs, homophilous sorting and preference falsification (Farrell, 2012). This project focuses on two of these questions. It aims to look at social media's ability to empower citizens which subsequently enables them to topple dictators. This is evident in the cases under analysis.

The earlier literature focuses on the emergence of the internet and its role in politics. There are several authors who have written about the potential effects of the internet on political participation (Polat 2005; Bridges et al. 2012; Hirzalla et al. 2010; Smith et al. 2009; Tolbert & Mcneal 2003; Effing et al. 2011; Livingstone & Markham 2008; McGrath 2011; Jennings & Zeitner 2003) prior to the rise of social media.

Polat (2005: 435) examines the relationship between the internet and political participation by deconstructing the internet into three facets. The article examines

the internet as an information source, a communication tool and a virtual public sphere. Polat does not arrive at any definitive conclusions concerning the link between the internet and political participation. It is stated that even though the internet may provide access to large quantities of information it is reliant on the assumption that citizens have a strong enough desire that they seek out the information and that all citizens have equal access to the internet. Polat (2005: 454) also indicates that the established scholarship on political participation is a valuable resource that should not be disregarded when analysing new forms of media. He specifically refers to the literature on the relationship between political participation and more traditional media sites such as television. Even though further investigation of this literature would be valuable, social media represents an important shift away from traditional media sources. This is referring to uni- and multi-directional interaction. This distinction was put forward by Himelboim et al. (2012; 94). It highlights the paradigm shift in terms of media. Social media has brought to the fore a new interactive way in which people can communicate which is both easily accessible and user-friendly (Himelboim et al., 2012).

Many studies have been focused on the role of the internet in terms of political participation and specifically during election campaigns. Some highlight the rise in non-traditional site use. Parmelee, Davies, & McMahan (2011), look at where political information is gathered and with specific reference to the 2008 US presidential election they measure where the majority of information was located particularly traditional versus non-traditional sites. The Pew Internet and American Life Project has been involved in several quantitative analyses into the role of social media and specifically its effects on politics (Smith et al., 2009; Hampton et al., 2011). The projects have been extensively involved in quantitatively examining who is using social media and for what purposes. The most recent report in 2011 by Hampton et al. looks at "Social Networking Sites and our Lives". Other quantitative works into the use of social media include Kushin and Yamamoto's article which analyses College students use of online media in the 2008 US election (Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010). Bridges et al. also examine young adults' online behaviour in terms of how they use the new Web 2.0 technologies for political engagement (Bridges et al., 2012). Therefore it is clear from this overview that there are several studies which have identified the importance of social media, its proliferation and

especially its role in political participation. After the recent Arab Spring and its effects there has been a surge within the literature in terms of the implications of social media on political mobilization.

In addition to the role played by the internet in encouraging political participation there is also literature on political mobilization. Two studies focus particularly on analysing the difference between internet mobilization and traditional or conventional face-to-face methods (Hooghe et al., 2010; Krueger, 2006). Hooghe et al. ran an experiment to assess the effectiveness of internet mobilization versus traditional face-to-face mobilization efforts. It was identified that many voluntary associations and political organizations increasingly utilise internet-based mobilization campaigns. It was found that the internet is successful in transferring knowledge and raising issue awareness but this did not necessarily lead to significant behavioural changes in their study (Hooghe et al., 2010). Krueger aims to test the hypothesis that due to the fact that the internet reduces communication costs it should therefore eliminate 'rational prospecting' which refers to the traditional way in which organisations choose who to target based on their likeliness to respond.

Vote advice applications (VAAs) are an example of where the internet has changed the political landscape by assisting voters. One of these applications is VoteMatch which compares the programs of different parties on a number of policy issues. Internet users are asked to answer several questions and then the VAA identifies the party closest to their policy preferences. The authors Hirzalla, van Zoonen and de Ridder focus their study on a few examples of vote advice applications to examine internet use and political participation particularly to understand whether the internet mobilises or normalises political participation (Hirzalla et al., 2010).

According to McChesney (1998) "media perform essential political, social, economic and cultural functions in modern democracies". McChesney was referring to the traditional sources of media including newspapers, radio and television. The internet and social media are both new and growing phenomena that have revolutionised how traditional media function. News can now be accessed online and people can participate in online discussion and debate on topical issues on social network sites. But if McChesney's point holds for the newer forms of media as well then we can

also assume that the internet as well as social media networks will also perform essential functions within functioning democracies.

The authors Boyd and Ellison (2008) provide a useful introduction to the study of social network sites. They provide an encompassing definition, history and overview of the existing scholarship. This piece is particularly insightful in that it includes a broad history which covers the emergence of social network sites which dates back to 1997. It also examines the rise and fall in popularity of several of the key social networking sites including Friendster; Myspace and Facebook. They define social network sites as “web-based services that allow individuals to achieve three specific outcomes; to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and thirdly view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system”. (Boyd & Ellison, 2008: 1). According to Boyd and Ellison (2008:8) the majority of research and scholarship on social network sites has focused on impression management and friendship performance, networks and network structure, online/offline connections, and privacy issues.

An alternative definition is provided by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010: 61) who focus specifically on the use of social media within the business realm and they put forward ten recommendations companies should follow when thinking about developing their own social media strategy. This article puts forward a definition of social media as well as the history of its development. This definition is then referred to several times by other authors (Effing et al., 2011; Auer, 2011). According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010: 61) social media are defined as “a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content”. The definition provided by Kaplan and Haenlein refers to the development of social media and the fact that it is not a completely new generation of tools. In fact it is based on the concept of Web 2.0 which is “a term that was first used in 2004 to describe a new way in which software developers and end-users started the World Wide Web; that is as a platform whereby content and applications are no longer created and published by individuals but instead are continuously modified by all users”(Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010: 60-61). The founder of the World Wide Web, Tim Berners-Lee, already expected this social use of the internet from the start; “The Web is more a social

creation than a technical one. It was designed for a social effect to help people work together” (quoted in Effing, Hillegersberg, & Huibers, 2011: 28).

Social Media have been identified as effective instruments for political mobilization and this can be evident in the recent surge of research into the role of new media during the Arab Spring. Kranzberg (1985: 50) is quoted many times within the literature for saying that “technology is neither good nor bad, nor is it neutral”. This identifies one of the main arguments that emerge throughout the literature. There are two competing explanations in terms of the role played by technology with regards to social change. These competing views are the technological determinist perspective, which states that new ICTs are responsible for causing social changes, and the organizational determinist perspective which purports instead that society causes the changes (Howard, 2011: 16). Others authors have also focused on identifying whether social media caused the political upheavals during the Arab Spring or if it was the citizens who had reached their limit in terms of what they would withstand (Lamer, 2012; Springborg, 2011; Christensen, 2011). Springborg profiles the political economy of the Arab region in order to identify the causes of the political upheaval and Lamer concludes that in the new globalised political system one cannot underestimate the power of social media to change the political landscape.

As introduced above there are two divergent views in terms of the role of the internet and social media in politics. In the book *The Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, Philip Howard supports the potential for new information and communication technologies to disrupt political regimes and trigger political transformation. He focuses on the ability of technological diffusion to have a democratizing effect across Muslim countries (Howard, 2011b). Shirky, is a supporter of the view that social media have political power that can “...help advance civil society in the long run, while helping to prevent abuses of power in the short run” (2011: 1). Some authors (Shirky, 2011; Calingaert, 2009) have furthered this argument to then present their recommendations in terms of US policy on internet access. According to Calingaert (2009: 65) “The internet will only be a force for freedom if the United States government adopts a clear and rigorous policy to make it so”. He encourages the introduction of US policy which will prevent the sale of US technology which can assist authoritarian leaders in censoring and monitoring media sites. Shirky highlights the dangers of this instrumental approach. Indicating that it

“overestimates the value of broadcast media while underestimating the value of media that allow citizens to communicate privately among themselves” (2011: 3).

Morozov highlights the diverging opinion from that of Philip Howard in his book *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of the Internet*. In this piece he warns against falling for the positive democratising potential of the internet but highlights the dangerous potential of the internet to also entrench dictators, be used to threaten dissidents and therefore it can make it harder rather than easier to promote democracy. This viewpoint states that one must not overstate the potential for the internet as it also has its downfalls (Morozov 2011a).

The recent and ongoing Arab Spring came as a surprise to many scholars, teachers and leaders. One of the infamous features of the Middle East North African (MENA) region was its longstanding relationship with authoritarian systems. Many authors have attempted to understand the resilience of authoritarianism in the MENA region. Even as the waves of democratization swept through other areas around the globe democracy seemed to miss the MENA region (Diamond, 2010; Gandhi & Przeworski, 2007; Howard & Roessler, 2009; Fjelde, 2010; Bunce & Wolchik, 2010; Bellin, 2004; Bellin, 2009; Albrecht & Schlumberger, 2004; King, 2007a; Bellin, 2012; Heydemann, 2007; Heydemann & Leenders, 2011).

The recent Arab Spring which resulted in the toppling of some of the longest standing authoritarian rulers took many scholars, researchers and leaders off-guard. Gause (2011) identifies this in his article “Why Middle East Studies Missed the Arab Spring”. He states that authoritarian stability is in fact a myth and identifies several factors including the military involvement, the popular revulsion of corruption and the emergence of a cross border Arab identity which he states caused the political upheavals. According to Fjelde the main focus of all dictators is to remain in office (Fjelde, 2010: 198). In his article he discusses the two main instruments through which dictators stay in power; coercion and co-optation. Therefore either forcefully marginalizing or eliminating political opponents through coercive action, or using offers of rewards such as positions of power or rents to transform opponents into supporters (Fjelde, 2010: 196). Albrecht and Schlumberger agree that regime maintenance is a top priority for authoritarian rulers. These authors state that “political liberalization and deliberalization are successfully employed by Arab

regimes as strategies for political survival” (Albrecht & Schlumberger, 2004: 374). Albrecht and Schlumberger identify five areas which are critical to understanding the survival of autocratic regimes; legitimization, elites, institution building, co-optation, and regimes’ reactions to external influences. These different issues are expounded upon by other authors.

Gandhi & Przeworski, (2007) present their study on why some nondemocratic leaders survive for decades whereas others fall soon after taking power. These two authors in their article identify the importance of institutions for ensuring nondemocratic rulers’ tenures. King on the other hand goes beyond examining institutions and other coercive tactics utilised by authoritarian rulers and instead he investigates how regime elites created political support during a period of dynamic economic and political change. He argues that “the character and consequences of economic reform, combined with the capacities of state parties, provided leaders in the Middle East and North Africa countries with the resources to resist democratization and transform authoritarian rule” (King, 2007: 434).

The authors Boose (2012), Yom (2005) and Kazemi and Norton (2006) highlight the importance of a strong civil society as a necessary prerequisite for democratization. The fact that most MENA countries lack a proactive civil society is utilised by some to explain the resilience of authoritarian leaders (Bellin, 2004). Others have also attempted to understand the stability or resilience of many authoritarian regimes. Bellin accounts for this resilience through authoritarian regimes overwhelming monopoly of force. She states that “...the solution to the puzzle of Middle Eastern and North African exceptionalism lies less in absent prerequisites of democratization and more in present conditions that foster robust authoritarianism, specifically a robust coercive apparatus in these states” (Bellin, 2004: 143). In a recent follow-up article Bellin (2012) has commented on this earlier work taking into account the Arab Spring. She continues to examine the importance of a regime’s coercive capabilities which she states is imperative to authoritarian regime survival. The recent evidence from the Arab Spring does indicate that in instances where the coercive arms of the state refused to kill and arrest protestors the leaders fled or stepped down such as in Tunisia whereas in Syria the armed forces have continue supporting the regime. Even as she still maintains her original argument she also does not exclude

mentioning the important role played by social media. "...the spread of social media...will no doubt be a game changer for the longevity of authoritarian regimes around the world from now on" (Bellin, 2012: 143).

Another recent article focuses on how during the recent Arab Spring some dictators toppled, such as those in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, while others managed to contain the protests and uprisings that took place in their own countries as a result. Heydemann & Leenders, (2011: 648) "argue that the capacity of some authoritarian regimes in the Middle East to suppress opposition movements can be explained, at least in part, by their capacity to learn from and adapt to the rapidly emerging challenges that mass uprisings posed for regime survival." In an article focusing on the Arab World Heydemann (2007) has put forward the term authoritarian upgrading. "Authoritarian upgrading involves reconfiguring authoritarian governance to accommodate and manage changing political, economic, and social conditions" (Heydemann, 2007: 1). According to Heydemann authoritarian regimes have upgraded and instituted reforms as a defensive response to challenges confronting them in the modern interdependent world. This he uses to explain the survival of the regimes for the past several decades.

Kricheli, Livine, & Magaloni, (2011) examine the theoretical and empirical conditions which facilitate civil uprisings against autocratic regimes and the determinants of their success. They examine these questions quantifiably using data from 1950-2000. In an earlier article written by Garrett, (2007) entitled, Protest in an Information Age, the literature on social movements and new ICTs is reviewed. It is an interesting piece that appeared three years prior to the Arab Spring yet examines the literature around social movements and new media. This literature is examined using a "...framework intended to explain social movements' emergence, development and outcomes by addressing three interrelated factors: mobilizing structures, opportunity structures and framing processes" (Garrett, 2007: 203). According to Garrett there are several examples where the use of cell phones, email and the World Wide Web has changed the landscape of social movements.

As stated above, Howard has been a key contributor to the discussion around the democratising effect of social media specifically looking at whether democracy is advanced through the diffusion of new information technologies (Howard, 2005;



Howard & Duffy, 2011; Howard & Hussain, 2011; Howard, 2011b). Auer, (2011) examines the democratising functions of social media in an article entitled *The Policy Sciences of Social Media*. This article draws on Harold D Lasswell's policy sciences which "explored the processors and outcomes of information collection, manipulation and transmission, and effects on various audiences" (Auer, 2011: 709). The concepts and theory developed by Lasswell are utilised to examine the role of new forms of media in terms of influencing important policy decisions.

Censoring all forms of media has been a commonly used method through which authoritarian regimes have maintained control of their citizens. Howard et al., (2011) analyses the questions of when do states disconnect their digital networks and why? Through assessing the relevant data these authors construct an event log of 566 incidents of where states have disconnected access to the internet and social media sites. They conclude that both authoritarian and democratic regimes are responsible for censoring media albeit for different purposes and it can have serious economic consequences. In his article *Authoritarianism vs. the Internet* Calingaert, (2009) focusses on the question "will the internet bring freedom to the oppressed or can it be controlled so that it cannot threaten repressive regimes?" (Calingaert, 2009: 64). In this article he identifies the many methods through which authoritarian regimes "curtail internet freedom". He states that they have "developed sophisticated, multi-layered systems to control the free flow of information on the internet" (Calingaert, 2009: 68-70).

Since the Arab Spring many authors have written about its origins, the details of what took place, the consequences as well as the role played by new media (Joffé, 2011; Khamis & Vaughn, 2011; Anderson, 2011; Khondker, 2011; Hampton et al., 2011; Cottle, 2011; Dewey & Kaden, 2012; Howard & Duffy, 2011). Tufekci & Wilson, (2012) performed a study whereby they established that through the use of social media Egyptian citizens were more likely to attend protests on the first day. Their study also indicated that 50% of their respondents used YouTube and Facebook to disseminate pictures and videos from the protests.

There is a useful base of information provided in the literature which covers the emergence of social media and their growing role within politics but there are still gaps that need to be filled and information that needs to be added. This brief

introduction to the current literature has touched on the literature which emerged with the development of new media.

There is also a strong focus on the Arab Spring within the current literature on new media. According to Phillip Seib, (2012: 1) one of the key lessons one can take away from the recent uprisings in the Middle East and North African region is that “as venues of mass communication become more diverse and persuasive, individual citizens become intellectually and politically empowered. They know more about what is going on around them and they use media tools to form communities of interest that enhance political activism”. Therefore an area still to be uncovered is the role of social media in the loss of control of authoritarian regimes and social media’s ability to allow previously repressed citizens with the ability to mobilize. A theory which makes a valid attempt to explain this phenomenon and its effects on society is Network Theory.

Network theory was developed by Manuel Castells. His research focusses on the potential of new media to shape society. He has written and published several articles and books on this topic including, *The Rise of the Network Society* (1996), *Communication, Power and Counter-power in the Network Society* (2007), *A Network Theory of Power* (2011), and more recently, *Communication Power* (2013). As social media and their role in political mobilisation has increased in popularity several authors have turned to Castells’ theory to explain and better understand the change to society brought on by the technological revolution of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Network theory as applied to modern society focuses on the suitability of the internet and social media to mobilize citizens. According to Castells “the media have become the social space where power is decided” (Castells, 2007: 238). Castells has written extensively on the Network Society and particularly how the technological advancements over the past decade have changed the world we live in. “...the revolution in communication technologies has intensified in recent years therefore it is logically the realm in which society has been most profoundly modified” (Castells, 2010: 1974).

Castells has developed a grounded theoretical framework to understand the avenues of social and political change in our time through understanding the

networks that connect our society. These networks have changed dramatically through the introduction of new communication technologies. Castells identifies the internet as "...a universal tool of interactive communication" (Castells, 2000: 9).

Castells has applied Network Theory to the modern world. His theory highlights how society is connected through interconnected nodes and through the technological revolution it has become even more important to understand how these networks work to connect us in ways never experienced before. According to Castells, "We have entered a new technological paradigm, centred around micro- electronics-based, information/communication technologies" (Castells, 2000: 9).

Network theory identifies a network as a set of interconnected nodes. Networks are a form of social organization that have existed for centuries. But they have taken on a new meaning in the Information Age by becoming information networks, powered by new information technologies (Castells, 2007). In terms of network theory, social relationships are made up of nodes. These nodes represent individual actors within the network, and the ties that connect them represent the relationships between the individuals. In today's society networks are identified as communicative structures. Communication networks are the patterns of contact that are created by the flow of messages among individuals through time and space. Networks process streams of information between nodes (Castells, 2013: 63). Castells' work discovered a new social structure which he identified as the network society because it is made up of networks in all the key dimensions of social organization and social practice (Castells, 2010).

According to Castells' the most significant communication transformation we have witnessed has been the shift of mass communication to mass self-communication. He describes mass self-communication as the process of interactive communication that can potentially reach a mass audience. The major transformation of the communication system is the fact that "...the production of messages are self-generated, the retrieval of messages are self-directed and the reception and remixing of content from electronic communication networks is self-selected" (Castells, 2013: 14-15). The diffusion of internet access, mobile communication, and digital and social media, have driven the development of "horizontal networks of interactive communication" (Castells, 2007: 246). The communication system was

originally centered around mass media, characterized by the mass distribution of a one-way message from one to many. The communication foundation of the network society is “the global web of horizontal communication networks that include the exchange of interactive messages from many to many” (Castells, 2007: 246)

Castells’ theory posits that the development and spread of horizontal communication networks has profoundly changed the practice of power in the global system. His theory argues that the nature of new communication technology has increased the influence of civil society and non-institutional socio-political actors by changing the form and dynamics of power relationships. Castells’ work focuses on the role of power and counter power within society. He states that “the transformation of communication by the advent of digital communication, and the associated changes in organization and culture, have deeply modified the ways in which power relationships operate” (Castells, 2013: 13-14).

Just a decade or two ago governments and other state entities could control the one-way flow of communication that existed with newspapers, radio and television. State owned media meant that the public received only the information that the state wanted them to receive (Howard et al., 2011). Due to the advent of self-mass communication; a highly interactive style of communication or user-generated media, citizens now have the ability to share and research more freely on the internet, and they have access to an unlimited amount of information. This development was aided by the establishment of WikiLeaks. This new form of self-mass communication also allows people to find and communicate with like-minded individuals.

The Network Theory presented by Castells can be used to explain how the characteristics of social media can be invaluable for political activism. This theory states that through the creation of weak ties, the anonymity provided by the internet, and the egalitarian nature of online communication which are inherent in social media they provide a space for citizens to mobilise. Granovetter has written about the strength of weak ties which is their ability to introduce us to new ideas and new information, and the internet and particularly social media allow these ties to be forged over vast geographical boundaries (Granovetter, 1983). In her new article written post the Arab Spring Bellin, identifies the importance of these attributes offered by the internet and social media. “Social media through its anonymity and

spontaneity...enabled the mobilization of collective action in ways that had been hereto impossible in repressive settings” (Bellin, 2012: 138).

Castells identifies how the new communication networks have three particular strengths in their favour; flexibility, scalability and survivability. Flexibility refers to their ability to continuously evolve with the changing shape of the movement. The nature of these new communication technologies means that these networks have the ability to reconfigure according to changing environments. Scalability refers to their ability to change size with little disruption. Due to the fact that they do not need a formal leadership, command and control centre, or vertical organisation to distribute information or instructions they have survivability to operate in a wide range of configurations (Castells, 2013: 66).

In addition to the changes noted above Castells suggests that the technological revolution will cause hierarchical organizations and established institutions to lose importance and relevance. The argument states that centralized administrations will lose out to networked organizational forms as they gain greater importance within the new networked society (Meier, 2011: 55).

One of the strengths of social media is its ability to allow people worldwide new ways to find one another; and to communicate and coordinate with one another. Castells has conceptualized in his theory how new network configurations can lead to the creation of new political movements. They do this by allowing previously disconnected, and undeveloped political identities to take shape and rise to prominent positions. In the MENA region this is particularly applicable where religions and ethnic divides were previously significant in preventing different groups from networking. In addition many authoritarian regimes across this area are also known to ban the creation of political parties and limit the right of their citizens to associate or create civil rights groups. This resulted in limited space where religious, ethnic, and cultural groups could meet and interact. Social media has helped such groups discover one another and break the psychological barrier of fear which had previously kept them apart (Safranek 2012).

This theoretical literature survey has provided an overview of all areas of literature critical to analysing the role of social media in undermining the control of Arab authoritarian regimes.

### **Chapter 3**

#### **Case Studies – Tunisia and Syria**

In order to answer the research question posed, this chapter will analyse two case studies to get a better understanding of how social media have been used to challenge authoritarian regimes.

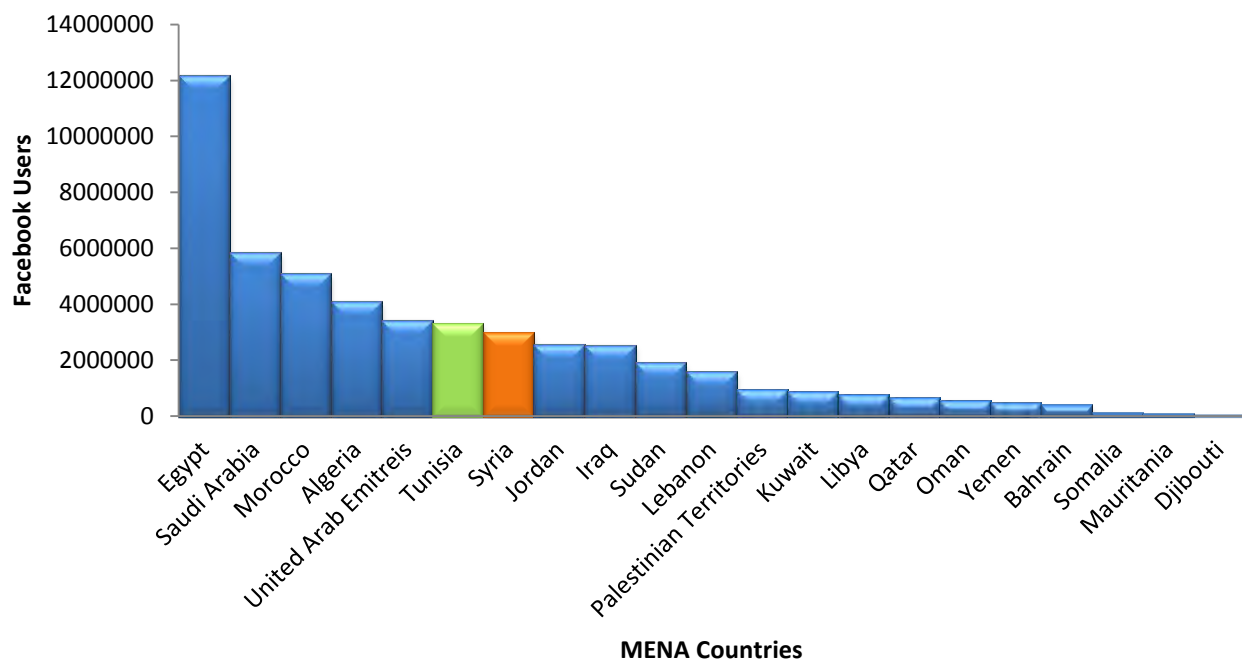
The two cases which will be examined are Tunisia, in North Africa and Syria in the Middle East. These two cases have been selected to show how social media in particular have assisted citizens within these two authoritarian states to overcome the obstacle of extreme censorship of the media and other forms of repression. The MENA region is an area which has remained stable in political terms for several decades and the paradigm of authoritarian resilience has been the only remarkable feature which scholars have focused on (Bellin, 2004). The MENA region has come under the spotlight recently due to the dramatic uprisings which began in Tunisia in 2010 and are still ongoing across several nations. These uprisings have resulted in several longstanding dictators being removed from power. This includes President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia who had ruled since 1987, President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt after ruling Egypt since 1981, Muammar el-Qaddafi of Libya after controlling Libya since 1969 and President Ali Abdullah Saleh of Yemen ending his 33 year reign. In addition these political upheavals have inspired similar anti-government protests across many other countries within the region including Syria, Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco and Sudan.

This Arab region has seen a dramatic increase in technological developments within recent years. Worldwide there are now 2.5 billion people connected via the World Wide Web. “The internet has been described as the single most important invention of the 21st century and as an equalizer that facilitates access to information and resources”. According to the Arab Social Media report published in 2013 by the Dubai School of Government; there are now over 125 million internet users in the

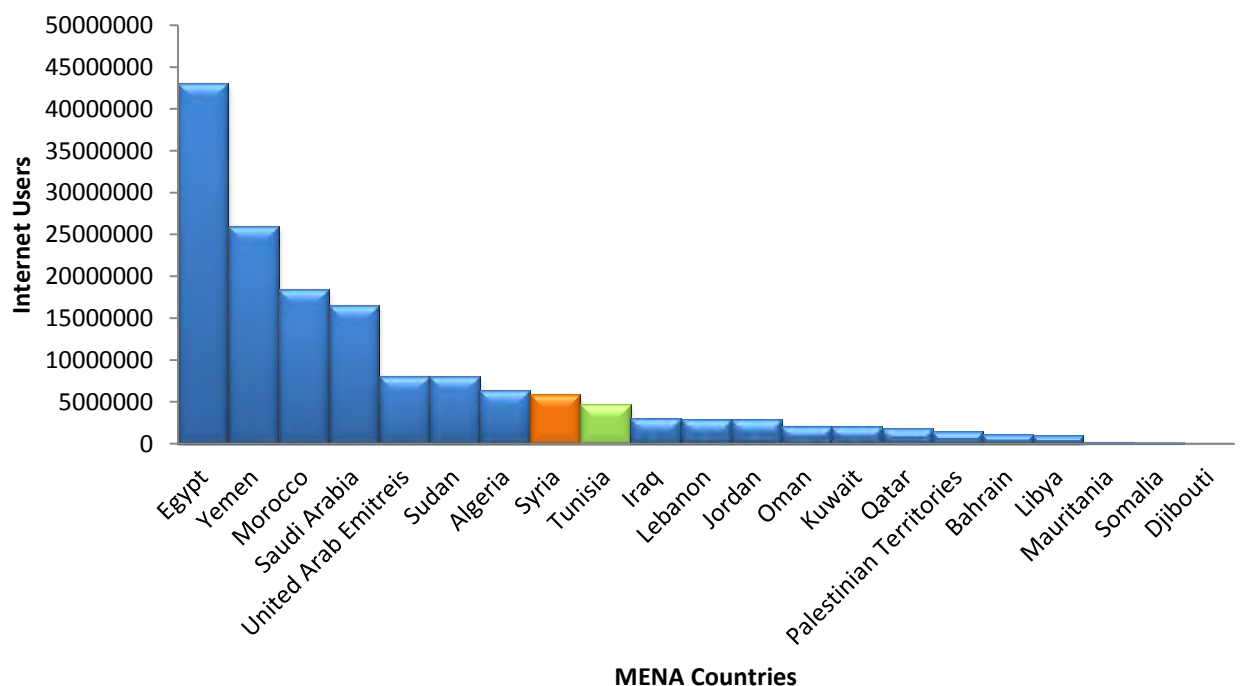
MENA region and more than 53 million of them actively use social media (Salem & Alshaer, 2013: 1).

The graphs illustrated below, figures 1 and 2, give an indication of the proliferation of internet and specifically Facebook users across the MENA region. Tunisia and Syria

**Figure 1: Facebook Users in the MENA Region 31-12-2012**



**Figure 2: Internet Users in the MENA Region 31-12-2013**

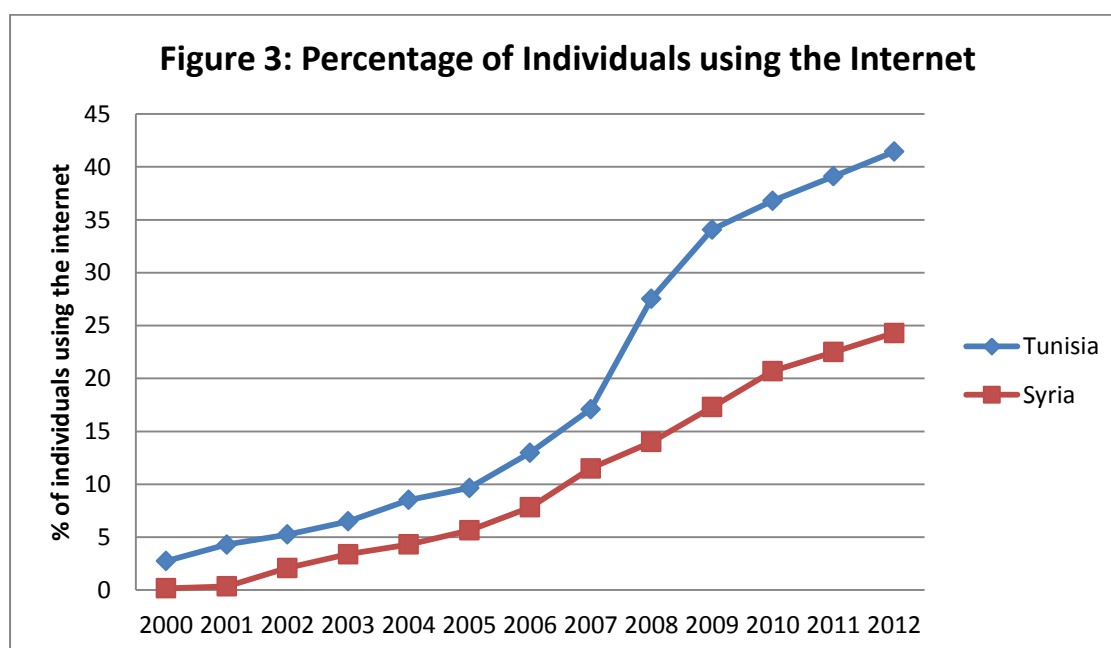




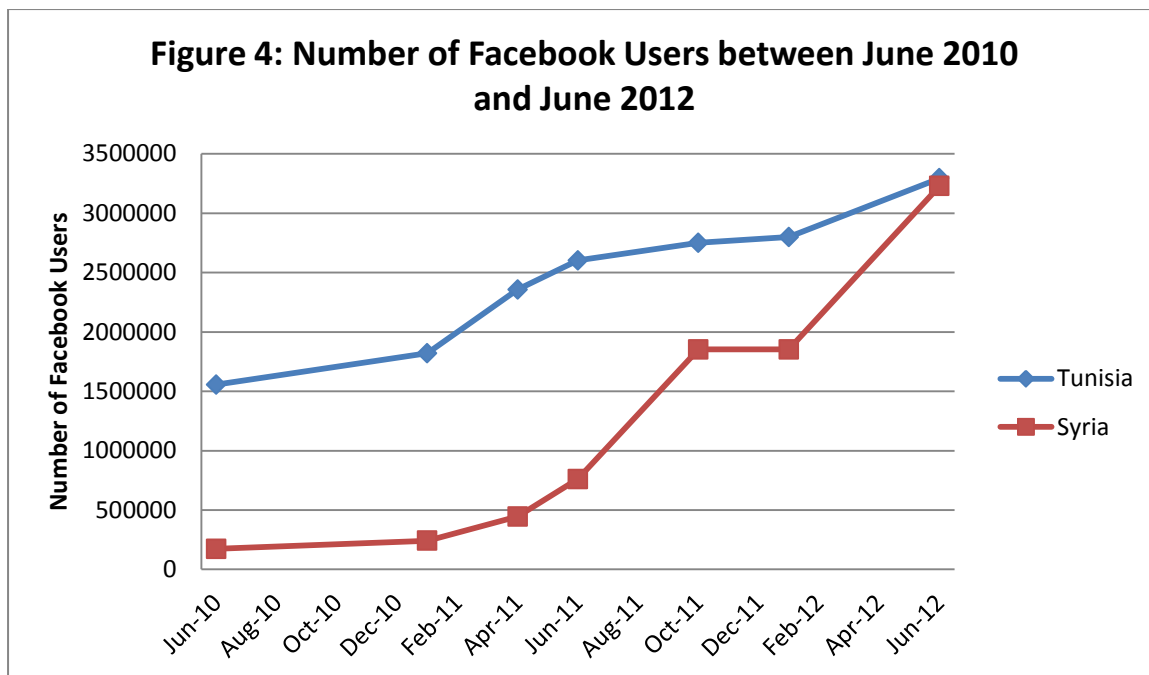
have been highlighted to show them comparatively within the region.

Tunisia and Syria do not exhibit the highest numbers of internet and Facebook users in the region but they are significantly high comparative to their size.

Figure 3 below indicates the rise in the percentage of individuals using the internet in both Tunisia and Syria from 2000- 2012. A steady increase in users is evident over the years in both countries. The infamous authoritarian resilience that was evident in the region prior to the uprisings which began in December 2010, as well as the exponential increase in social media users has resulted in considerable attention being placed on social media's role in the uprisings across the MENA region. Many scholars have referred to the recent uprisings as the Twitter and Facebook Revolutions due to the role played by these mediums. Facebook is the most popular social media site utilised in the MENA region (Salem & Mourtada, 2012). Therefore the statistics of Facebook users in Tunisia and Syria are highlighted below to show the level of penetration and usage of this social media site. According to the Arab Social Media Report Tunisia when compared to Syria has had consistently higher rates of Facebook penetration from April 2010 to May 2013. This period is significant as it covers the period since the start of the uprisings across the Arab region.



Source: <http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx>



Source: [Arab Social Media Report: http://www.ArabSocialMediaReport.com/](http://www.ArabSocialMediaReport.com/)

*Figure 5*

Facebook Users and Country populations: 2011-2012						
Country	Number of Facebook Users (01/10/2011)	Population (2011)	Facebook Penetration (%)	Number of Facebook Users (26/06/2012)	Population (2012)	Facebook Penetration (%)
Tunisia	2,750,160	10,476,355	26.25%	2,986,700	10,704,950	27.90%
Syria	1,381,461	23,008,268	6.00%	3,228,677	21,117,690	15.29%

Source: [Arab Social Media Report: http://www.ArabSocialMediaReport.com/](http://www.ArabSocialMediaReport.com/)

Figure 4 shows the increase in Facebook users between June 2010 and June 2012. Facebook penetration increases in both Tunisia and Syria from 2011 to 2012 but is substantially higher in Tunisia than in Syria which can be seen by Figure 5.

The so-called Arab Spring or Arab awakening originated in Tunisia where the first uprisings to overthrow their repressive dictator Zine Al-Abidine Ben Ali began after a desperate informal trader, Mohamed Bouazizi, set himself on fire before the governorate in Sidi Bouzid to protest against the unjust system. According to Schraeder and Redissi (2011:5) in the study of the Arab Spring of 2011, Tunisia should be considered to be 'case zero'. The uprising in Tunisia, which successfully led to Ben Ali fleeing the country on 14 January 2011, also prompted a region wide domino effect of demonstrations across the Middle East and North Africa (Schraeder

& Redissi, 2011: 5). Syria has also felt the effects of the pro-democracy protests which have resulted in wide reaching instability and violence.

Tunisia is seen by many as the success story of the Arab Spring whereby Syria is still at the time of writing in a state of civil war. The figures above indicate a higher penetration of internet and social media users in Tunisia therefore a contributing factor to Tunisia's success could be attributed to these higher levels of social media penetration. The Tunisian people managed to topple their dictator from his post of 24 years whereas the Syrian protests have resulted in chaos and fighting. Irrespective of the varying outcomes this research will examine the role played by social media in initially undermining the authoritarian control and resilience that was evident in both countries prior to December 2010.

Even though each case is unique in several regards they also have many similarities. It is their placement in the MENA region as well as the recent anti-government protests that have taken place in both countries that have resulted in their selection. These cases have been selected to represent the MENA region and therefore it is relevant that one is from North Africa and the other the Middle East. Both nations have a history of French colonial rule. Syria and Tunisia managed to declare independence 10 years apart from one another in 1946 and 1956 respectively.

*Figure 6*

Tunisia and Syria Important Indicators		
	Tunisia	Syria
Population (2013 est.)	10,886,500	22,845,550
Population ages 0-14 (% of total) (2011)	23.32	35.49
Population ages 15-64 (% of total) (2011)	69.68	60.68
Population ages 65 and above (% of total) (2011)	7.01	3.83
Unemployment, total (% of total labor force) (modeled ILO estimate) (2011)	12.90	8.40
Unemployment with tertiary education (% of total unemployment)	30.90	4.90
Unemployment, youth total (% of total labor force ages 15-24) (modeled ILO estimate) (2011)	29.30	19.30
GDP (current US\$)	45951129422	40405006007
GDP per capita (current US\$)	4305.04	2065.54
Internet users (per 100 people) (2011)	39.1	22.5
Source: World Development Indicators <a href="http://databank.worldbank.org/data/views/reports/tableview.aspx">http://databank.worldbank.org/data/views/reports/tableview.aspx</a>		

Both countries are relatively small in land area size within the region. According to 2013 population estimates Tunisia has a population of 10.8 million people and Syria

has a population of 22.8 million people (World Bank). The population statistics in both Syria and Tunisia show how both countries have predominately young populations with over 60% of their populations between the ages of 15 and 64. Unemployment rates amongst the youth are also relatively high in both Tunisia and Syria at 29.30 and 19.30 respectively.

In recent years both countries have made concerted efforts to modernise in order to remain competitive within a globally interdependent world. Technological improvements have led to increased access to computers and the internet. Internet users in Tunisia and Syria are 39.1 per 100 and 22.5 per 100 respectively. There is great irony in the sense that nations worldwide have felt compelled to modernise in order to remain competitive in a globally interdependent system where technology is imperative for many economic sectors but it can be argued that this modernising technology provided citizens with the means to rise up and protest against the authoritarian regime (Khondker, 2011). Therefore Heydemann's authoritarian upgrading allowed the regimes to exist longer by placating citizens to believe reforms and change were going to continue. Instead these upgrades enabled citizens to communicate and coordinate ultimately resulting in the uprisings that toppled and shook many rulers in the region (Heydemann, 2007; Howard, 2011b).

Prior to the Arab Spring the MENA region had been infamous for containing strong authoritarian regimes. Both Tunisia and Syria have been governed by authoritarian rule since independence. Both Ben Ali in Tunisia and Assad in Syria are responsible for orchestrating constitutional changes in order to remain in power over the stated term limits (Sadiki, 2002; 78). Arabic is the official language in both of these Arab nations and Islam is the major religion practiced in both Tunisia and Syria. Prior to December 2010 both Syria and Tunisia were strong one party authoritarian states (Boose, 2012: 312). The authoritarian states in Syria and Tunisia were both infamous for being two of the most threatening and harsh regimes in the region.

This chapter will examine each case individually to evaluate the role played by social media during the recent Arab Spring. Tunisia will be examined first for the sake of chronology in light of the fact that Tunisia was the catalyst for the recent uprisings across the MENA region. Protests began in Tunisia in December 2010 and spread to Syria a few months later in March 2011. A brief background and historical overview

for each case will be provided before examining in what respects social media were effective for initiating political mobilization and stimulating political change in order to challenge authoritarian regimes. This will be examined by providing statistics of social media penetration particularly in the years leading up to the uprisings. Through Freedom House and Amnesty International reports the level of repression, censorship and limited freedom of expression allowed to citizens in both nations will be shown.

Through this examination of cases it will be evident that due to the control and censorship of traditional media sources, social media particularly Facebook, Twitter and YouTube rose to the fore by providing means for protestors to communicate and coordinate with one another. It was also a vital means of communicating with the international press and outside world. All of which gave the citizens in both Tunisia and Syria the means to convey their frustrations and demands for change. Social media was primarily responsible for the speed in which information travelled and subsequently the speed at which change was able to take place.

### *Tunisia*

The Tunisian uprising that began in December 2010 ended with the departure of Ben Ali and his family on 14 January 2011. This resulted in the dissolution of his regime that had lasted for 24 years. At the same time, it signalled to the world the possible end of authoritarian rule in the country for the first time since Tunisia gained independence from France in 1956 (Cavatorta & Haugbølle, 2012: 179).

As the northern most country on the African continent over the millennia Tunisia has been dominated by many of the world's great powers. These historical power houses identified Tunisia's powerful position and fought to control this piece of land. These groups included the Phoenicians, Romans, Vandals and Byzantines to the Arabs, Ottoman Turks and French (Aljazeera Country Profile, 2011). French colonial rule ended in 1956 when Tunisia was recognised as an independent state. The country's first president was Habib Bourguiba. He ruled for 31 years and during that time established a strict one-party state. He is renowned for his stance against Islamic fundamentalism and establishing rights for women unmatched by any other Arab

state. He is responsible for abolishing polygamy and instituting compulsory free education (BBC Country Profile, 2013). In November 1987, Bourguiba was removed from office and replaced by Zine el Abidine Ben Ali in a bloodless coup. At the age of 87 Bourguiba was declared senile and medically unfit to rule (CIA World Factbook, 2014).

Ben Ali inherited a country that was politically falling apart. The final years under Bourguiba had been marked by severe political repression and instability. Bourguiba's erratic behaviour during his later years had damaged his revered status as one of the founding fathers of modern Tunisia (Schraeder & Redissi, 2011: 6). The final years of his rule were the most illiberal. Severe punishments were delivered to anyone who criticised the state (Sadiki, 2002: 59-60). 7 November 1987 is the date when Zine el Abidine Ben Ali became the new president of Tunisia. This change was initially welcomed widely amongst Tunisians from all walks of life. It marked the end of the Bourguiba era (Sadiki, 2002).

Ben Ali's rise to power between 1986 and 1987 was nothing short of impressive. In less than two years Ben Ali was promoted from Minister of the Interior to the Premiership in October 1987. Thirty-six days later, the then 51-year old Ben Ali became Tunisia's second president (Sadiki, 2002: 57-58). During his 24 years in power Ben Ali "won" five consecutive elections. The final election he won was in October 2009 with 89.6% of the vote. In 2002 he managed to alter the constitution to allow him to remove the three-term limit allowing him to remain in power indefinitely. From analysing his time in office it can be said that many of Ben Ali's promises to democratize Tunisia remained unfulfilled (Schraeder & Redissi, 2011: 8).

"...of all Arab countries, Tunisia was believed to be one of the least likely to experience such a massive uprising against a regime that had seemingly obtained a number of notable achievements" (Cavatorta & Haugbølle, 2012: 182). Tunisia was viewed around the world as an Arab success story. However, the image Ben Ali portrayed of himself and Tunisia was a façade. Several authors (Cavatorta & Haugbølle, 2012; Schraeder & Redissi, 2011; Heydemann, 2007) have addressed the way in which Ben Ali managed to strengthen his authoritarian power while giving the impression to the rest of the world of having embraced democratic modernization. Heydemann (2007) has identified this form of authoritarian resilience

as authoritarian upgrading and refers to the method of implementing certain political and economic reforms in order to ensure the survival of authoritarian regimes. According to Cavatorta & Haugbølle (2012: 192), “One of the masters of such authoritarian upgrading was certainly Ben Ali, who in the process also managed to project an international image of a secular and liberal modernizer bent on slowly constructing a democratic political system”.

According to Boose (2012: 313), “Ben Ali made Tunisia seem like a modern, tourist friendly Arab country”. It was seen as an economic miracle. World Bank data does support some positive growth and development during the early years of Ben Ali’s rule. Between 1996 and 2000 yearly growth averaged 5.6 per cent and between 2001 and 2005 it averaged 5 per cent. After 2005 it dropped by almost half to an average of 3 per cent (Cavatorta & Haugbølle, 2012: 183). Behind the façade which Ben Ali had created of all the positive developments in Tunisia, the majority of citizens still lacked the basic rights of free speech, and a free press. They were also regularly subjected to severe oppressions of basic human rights. Ben Ali was a strong leader who ruled with an iron fist, but held on to the basis of his legitimacy through equal measures of repression and co-option. Like many other Arab states, Ben Ali’s regime consisted of an extensive system of patronage among the elites, who were largely relatives of his (Boose, 2012: 313). Over the years of Ben Ali’s rule “the regime became more authoritarian and less in touch with local socioeconomic and political realities”(Schraeder & Redissi, 2011: 8). This is clearly evident in several of the issues identified below.

Ben Ali pretended to be committed to upholding the integrity of citizens human rights but in reality this was a pretence to ensure the survival of his authoritarian regime. Any political dissent expressed by citizens resulted in swift repression. In order to maintain control the regime committed widespread abuses of human rights. Their main focus was to silence and control all opposition to the state. (Cavatorta & Haugbølle, 2012: 188).

According to an Amnesty International report published on Tunisia in 2010, “People who criticized the government or exposed official corruption or human rights violations faced harassment, intimidation and physical assault by state security officers”. In the same report it is stated that in 2010 “Freedom of expression,

association and assembly remained severely restricted. Government critics, including journalists, human rights defenders and student activists, were harassed, threatened and prosecuted. Torture and other ill-treatment continued to be reported, and prisoners were subjected to harsh prison conditions” (Amnesty International Tunisia Report, 2010).

The iron fist through which Ben Ali maintained control was made up of an extensive security apparatus. In addition to a military of more than 35, 000 troops Ben Ali established several security forces. These security forces were known to number over 130, 000. This level of security was equivalent to the police presence of France, which has six times Tunisia’s population (Schraeder & Redissi, 2011: 6). There was a variety of security formations including the Presidential Guard, National Guard, political police, tourism police and the university police. The harsh realities of Ben Ali’s repressive authoritarian state are captured by the Tunisian Freedom House ratings. Freedom House is a non-profit organisation that assigns countries scores based on the level of freedom evident. Scores are based on Political Rights and Civil Liberties and they range from 1 (most free) to 7 (least free) (Schraeder & Redissi, 2011: 8). Between 1999 and 2007 the Freedom score, which is the average of the scores assigned for political rights and civil liberties, remained 5.5. From 2008- 2010 this score worsened to 6. This was due to the declining political rights rating which dropped from 6 to 7 in 2008 due to credible accusations of rampant corruption among the president’s family and close associates. These ratings are very high and reveal a severe lack of freedom within Tunisia. These terrible scores are due to the authority’s continuous and systematic harassment and imprisonment of opponents of the government (Freedom House).

An additional feature of the Tunisian authoritarian regime was a strictly controlled media. All major print and broadcast media adhered scrupulously to the government regulations around the media and avoided any criticism of it. It was governed by the Press Code which threatened punishment and imprisonment to those who criticised the state. The Tunisian media was wholly controlled by the state. According to Sadiki, “The relationship between the media and the State is one of clientelism-patronage”. The government manages to maintain control of the media through a two-pronged strategy; punitive action threatened by the Press Code and the fact that the media depends on state subsidies to function. “Criticism of state policies by the



media is equated with either 'defamation' or disturbance of 'public order'. The interpretation of these two, Articles 73 and 75, is the prerogative of the Interior Minister" (Sadiki, 2002; 70-71). The media is controlled in order to stop criticisms becoming public knowledge. This is why Ben Ali has put in place strict defamation and libel laws making it very difficult to report, or investigate corruption. This is a critical part in maintaining control by censoring what information the citizens receive (Sadiki, 2002; 70-71).

Neo-patrimonialism as a form of governance was strongly enforced by the Ben Ali regime. "The key to personal success was not achievement in a given field, but links to the extended family of the president" (Schraeder & Redissi, 2011: 6). This was one of the frustrations that led to the Tunisian people protesting against the government and especially Ben Ali and his corrupt means of running the country. The Tunisian public were very quickly losing their patience when it came to the level of corruption especially within the ranks of the president's extended family. The reality of the levels of corruption is clearly evident in the annual Corruption Perception Index maintained by Transparency International, in which Tunisia's ranking declined from 43<sup>rd</sup> in 2005 to 59<sup>th</sup> in 2010, out of a total of 178 countries observed (Schraeder & Redissi, 2011: 9). As was correctly identified by Cavatorta and Haugbolle, "...the significant increase in corrupt practices not only undermined economic performance, but created widespread resentment against the ruling elites among ordinary citizens given the resulting increase in income inequalities" (Cavatorta & Haugbølle, 2012: 185).

The rampant corruption evident within the regime was made even more public when it was inadvertently released in November 2010 through WikiLeaks. One report in particular was very damaging towards Ben Ali and his family. The report was written by Robert F. Godec, the U.S. ambassador from 2007 to 2009. In detail, Godec described Ben Ali's authoritarianism and the rampant corruption of his in-laws and extended family (Schraeder & Redissi, 2011: 14).

Tunisia has a very young population. This is a common trend across much of the developing world. Nearly 40 per cent of the population of Tunisia is under the age of 25 (CIA World Fact book). "Slightly more than two of every five Tunisians are under 25 years old; almost 35 percent of those between 19 and 24 are students; and one

of three young people is unemployed” (Schraeder & Redissi, 2011: 12). Ben Ali had successfully created and promoted the myth surrounding Tunisia’s economic miracle unfortunately “the economic miracle of Tunisia had a very dark side where under-employment, unemployment, difficult access to the labour market, income inequalities and wide regional gaps were the main features” (Cavatorta & Haugbølle, 2012: 184). Several socioeconomic and political indicators actually show the reality of the economic situation in Tunisia just before the uprisings. “Unemployment had risen to 14 percent in 2010, with the figure for those aged 15 to 24 years exceeding 30 percent”. One of the most critical issues was that those most severely affected by the increasing unemployment rate were the highly educated. Over 45 percent of university graduates could not find employment. This was a strange predicament in a country where higher education was encouraged yet the economy failed to provide job prospects after graduation.

Another economic stress which negatively affected the Tunisian people was the exponential rise in food costs. In 2008, the average Tunisian household was spending nearly 36 percent of its household budget on basic foodstuffs for home consumption. To put this in context a comparable figure for the United States at that time would be less than 7 percent (Schraeder & Redissi, 2011: 7-8).

Through educating the workforce and spearheading the technological revolution for economic purposes the Tunisian government unintentionally “...created and trained future dissenters who used the internet to oppose the regime and then mobilize against it” (Cavatorta & Haugbølle, 2012: 192). The technological revolutions brought about several changes. The regime embraced education and new technologies as this was perceived as crucial to develop an educated workforce and a competitive economy that would be able to operate in the globalised modern world. It was also thought to be necessary to ensure investment. It had the consequence of creating a technologically savvy youth. This was instrumental in providing the youth with the tools of political dissent and political mobilization (Cavatorta & Haugbølle, 2012: 186-187).

The internet was first launched for public use in Tunisia in 1996, and the first broadband connections were made available in 2005. The Arab region has seen a spike in internet users and active social media members since 2005. According to

ITU, the international telecommunication Union, the percentage of internet users in Tunisia has increase from 2.75% in 2000 to 41.44% in 2012. During December 2010 the penetration of Facebook users in Tunisia was ranked 6<sup>th</sup> within the MENA region at 17.42% (Salem & Mourtada 2011). About one in every five Tunisians maintains a profile on a social-networking site. According to a March 2011 survey that Schraeder conducted in Tunis, 91 percent of university students visit Facebook at least once a day, and on average spend 105 minutes there daily (Schraeder & Redissi, 2011: 11-12).

The Tunisian Internet Agency (ATI) was created by the government to promote internet access for Tunisian citizens. They implemented a project during the late 1990's aimed to ensure Tunisians had access to computers and the internet. Average Tunisians could not afford to purchase personal computers and therefore in order to give more citizens access to computers the government launched *Publinet* in 1998. This concept was similar to an internet café but without the café. A *Publinet* was made up of a room with computers with internet access which was available for public use for a small fee. The *Publinet* project aimed to improve internet access, particularly in rural regions, and to create new job opportunities for young Tunisians. The *Publinet* project was rapidly set up all over the country. They were monitored very closely by the regime and periodically they stepped in to block access to a number of websites. From this example we can see how ...“the regime inadvertently improved not only the skills necessary for economic growth, but also those necessary for anti-regime online mobilization” (Cavatorta & Haugbølle, 2012: 186-187).

Since traditional media are censored and tightly controlled by the government, the internet has been used as a comparatively open forum for political discussions and debates on issues concerning the people. As the internet penetration continued to grow as citizens identified this space to speak freely on issues, a space that had been severely lacking within Tunisia society previously, the regime responded by creating an extensive online censorship and filtering system. According to the Freedom House report on Internet Freedom, “in 2009 and especially in 2010, censorship expanded and became increasingly arbitrary. About 100 blogs as well as several online applications like the photo-sharing site Flickr were blocked at least temporarily in 2010”. According to the Freedom House rankings Tunisia remained

Not Free in 2009 with their internet freedom total escalating from 76 out of 100 to 81 out of 100 from 2009 to 2011. 0 represented most free and 100 least free (Freedom House, 2011). Due to the censorship and monitoring of traditional avenues where political dissent could be aired, citizens and civil actors began to seek out areas to operate outside the strict control of the regime. Therefore they turned to mobilizing online and using the connections and ties formed on social network sites. Even though restrictions and repression existed within these mediums albeit to a much lesser degree, it was still a realm where political engagement and criticism could be voiced (Cavatorta & Haugbølle, 2012: 189). An increasingly educated and globally connected population had been created. One that was more aware than ever before of its rights and of what was really going on in the regime.

The uprisings which began in Tunisia in December 2010 were often referred to as the Facebook or Twitter revolutions due to the active role played by these social networking sites. "Social media sites such as Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook, as well as various blogs, have played an important role in providing independent information and analysis, spreading the protesters' plans, and showing videos of demonstrations in cities across the country and the world". Subsequently, this also resulted in the government becoming more actively involved in dismantling networks of online activists, hacking into social networking and blogging accounts, conducting extensive online surveillance, and disabling activists' online profiles and blogs (Freedom House, 2011).

According to several authors the widespread use of cell phones and social media, most notably Facebook and Twitter, is critical in explaining how the protests spread throughout the country so rapidly. The initial protests began in Sidi Bouzid as a result of Bouazizi's self-immolation. This act of desperation by a man who represented so many Tunisians was recorded on cell phone video cameras, posted on the internet, and shared on Facebook. The video clip captured the attention of Al Jazeera, which became the first international news outlet to run the story. As protests spread throughout Tunisia the regime responded with deadly force. The government's response seemed to further encourage Tunisians to continue their fight.

Tunisians from all walks of life got involved to spread the word of the atrocities taking place in Tunisia. Doctors and nurses in clinics and hospitals across the country as

well as family members and activists began going online to share cell phone pictures and videos of protesters killed by the government. "Since about one out of every three Tunisians is an Internet user, awareness of what was happening was soon pervasive" (Schraeder & Redissi, 2011: 11-12). From this example it is clear how social media was used as a tool to facilitate political mobilisations that ultimately led to political change within Tunisia.

Schraeder ran a survey in March 2011 that produced the following information that serves as further evidence of social media as a tool that assisted in facilitating the uprisings in Tunisia that resulted in Ben Ali's departure. According to the survey, "Nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of student respondents said that Facebook had been their primary source of information about demonstrations between December 17 and January 14. Almost a third (32 percent) of all students indicated that they had first learned of Bouazizi's self-immolation via Facebook". The government very quickly realised the important role the internet was playing in the protests. The Ben Ali regime responded by employing "a virtual army of censors to block or filter YouTube, Dailymotion, and other sites". It has been confirmed by Joe Sullivan, Facebook's chief security officer, that in December 2010 the Tunisian government tried to hack into Facebook and steal user passwords (Schraeder & Redissi, 2011: 11-12).

Social networks rely on equal access to an interrelated common space through which its members exchange points-of-view and discuss issues of common concern. The Tunisian social media users also found the space to be more open and comparatively freer from the clutches of Ben Ali's regime (Mabrouk, 2011: 633). It is evident that the Tunisian population was predominantly young, the privileged and educated had limited employment prospects, and those in poverty had no escape due to inequality and corruption. Frustrations escalated and in addition access to technology empowered them to a point where they felt able to "free themselves after fifty-five years of one party, of exclusive personal power, of two presidents: Bourguiba, a modern but despotic statesman, and General Ben Ali, a corrupt dictator" (Jdey, 2012: 83).

It is clear that the Tunisian people had suffered greatly under the hard realities of the Ben Ali regime. Any opponents to the regime were harshly dealt with and media was tightly controlled and censored. The entrance of social media onto the scene

provided citizens with a means to communicate with the outside world and more importantly with each other to communicate and coordinate how and when to protest against the regime.

## *Syria*

The Syrian revolution began in March 2011 just months after Tunisian protests had successfully resulted in the removal of their despotic ruler. Now inspired by the events taking place across the region Syrians took to the streets demanding freedom and political reforms (Shehabat, 2012: 1). These anti-government protests broke out in the southern province of Dar'a. Protesters were demanding the repeal of the State of Emergency laws, that allowed arrests without charge, the legalization of political parties, and the removal of corrupt local officials and for the current president Bashar al-Assad to step down. Since then demonstrations and unrest have spread to nearly every city in Syria and are ongoing even at the time of writing. As the government's response has become more repressive and severe so the situation has worsened.

Modern Syria is a country situated in the heart of the Middle East. It borders Lebanon and the Mediterranean Sea to the west, Turkey to the north, Iraq to the east, Jordan to the south, and Israel to the southwest. The capital of Syria is Damascus. Syria is home to diverse ethnic and religious groups, including Arabs, Armenians, Assyrians, Kurds, Turkmen, and others, with the Sunni Muslims constituting the majority (74%), followed by the Shiites (Alawis and Ismailis making up 13%), Christians (10%), and Druze (3%). Modern Syria has experienced several periods of political instability driven by the conflicting interests of these various groups (Emadi, 2011: 63).

Syria has a long history involving many different invasions and occupations but the modern Syria of today was established after the First World War when France acquired a mandate over Syria. Syria was controlled by France until April 1946 when it was granted independence. The period following independence was tumultuous. There were numerous military coups and attempted coups which caused severe political instability. This continued for several decades from 1949-1971. Between 1958 and 1961 Syria united with Egypt to form the United Arab Republic. This union

ended in 1961 because there was dissatisfaction with Egypt's dominance in the unity government and the Syrian Arab Republic was re-established (CIA World Factbook).

Political instability continued until the Arab Socialist Baath Party seized power in a coup on 8 March 1963. Power struggles within the ruling Baath Party enabled the military wing of the party led by generals Salah Jadid and Hafez Assad to seize power in a coup on 23 February 1966. Salah Jadid then tried to remove Assad but was ineffective. Assad then independently launched a coup and formally took charge of Syria on 13 November 1970 (Emadi, 2011: 64). The political instability which followed Syrian independence is a divergence between the histories of Tunisia and Syria. Both countries gained independence from France. Syria gained independence 10 years prior to Tunisia yet endured several decades of severe political turmoil and coups.

In November 1970, when Hafez al-Assad seized power he brought political stability to the country. Hafez al-Assad ruled Syria for 30 years from 1970-2000 when he died. Following his death his son Bashar al-Assad was sworn in as president after a popular referendum in July 2000 (CIA World Factbook). Emergency Law was executed in Syria from 1963 to 2011. This effectively suspended most constitutional rights of citizens. The system of government in Syria is considered to be non-democratic. The Syrian regime is notorious for its vicious repression. Former president Hafez Assad ruled the nation with an iron fist. The Assad family were known to brutally suppress opposition, leaving no room for political opponents. Citizens lived with emergency laws for years which meant that citizens face daily violations of freedoms and rights. The Assad family belongs to the minority 'Alawite' sect (Shehabat, 2012: 1-2). After coming to power Assad removed all political opponents from positions of authority in the government and the party. In order to ensure the survival of his family he appointed trusted members of his own minority Alawi community to prominent posts in the government (Emadi, 2011: 64). All aspects of the political system, the military, the media and economy are controlled by the Alawite sect. Assad remained in control for decades as political stability was regarded as more important by both the Syrian people and international community.

Before his death, Hafez Assad, like many other despotic Arab leaders, had been grooming his oldest son, Basil, to take over from him upon his death. Unfortunately,

Basil died in a car accident in 1994. The responsibility of successor subsequently fell to Hafez' s younger son, Bashar. Bashar had to leave his studies in London and return home to Syria where Hafez began preparing him to be his successor (Emadi, 2011: 69-70). When Assad died in June 2000, the ruling party and the military elite closed ranks and to prevent a power struggle they ratified the process Hafez had begun of establishing his son, Bashar, as his successor (Hinnebusch, 2012: 98). They promoted Bashar to the rank of general and commander-in-chief of the armed forces and chair of the ruling party, and nominated him as head of the state. The parliament amended the constitution to lower the age requirement for head of state from forty to of thirty-four to allow Bashar to be president. The parliament unanimously elected him president of Syria. After a national referendum held on 10 July 2000 he was proclaimed the winner, obtaining 97.2 percent of votes cast. A second public referendum conducted in 2007 elected him for a second seven-year term as president. He was the only candidate who ran in the election (Emadi, 2011: 69-70).

The Syrian economy Assad Sr. left behind was plagued with the typical problems of command economies; inefficiency, corruption, and redundant employment to name a few. Syria's economic problems originate from "... limited resources, an oversized military, dwindling external aid, corrupt managers, and a high population growth rate". The political system Bashar inherited was a one-party system, dominated by military and security chiefs who came mostly from the Alawite minority (Ghadbian, 2001: 634). There are many similarities evident between the situations in Syria and Tunisia. As with Tunisia the new younger rulers' rise to power represented hope for change and reform. When Bashar al-Assad assumed power in July 2000 a month after the death of his father there was a lot of "optimism about a young president with exposure to western education...in his inaugural speech he emphasized his determination to modernize Syria" (Hinnebusch, 2012; 95).

To garner public support for his leadership Bashar declared that his government would implement several reforms. The first six months after assuming power were viewed with great optimism by the Syrian people. Reforms included; "releasing political prisoners, closing down the notorious Tadmur prison, permitting establishment of private universities, reforming schools , and relaxing state restrictions on the media" (Emadi, 2011: 69-70). Bashar also aimed to improve



technology and provide greater internet access. During his studies abroad he had been exposed to modern technology and aimed to bring this to Syria. Lesch referred to this period of reforms in Syrian history as the 'Damascus Spring' (Lesch, 2011: 421). This is another example of authoritarian upgrading as described by Heydemann (2007). Syria underwent a brief period of reform that made citizens feel optimistic. These reforms, like in the Tunisian case, intended to ensure the survival of the authoritarian regime in a world that was moving toward democratic styles of government.

Unfortunately this period of reform was short lived and consisted of purely cosmetic reforms. The political system itself remained intact. This was clearly a form of authoritarian upgrading in play. A similar attempt was seen in Tunisia. Hinnebusch, (2012) focuses on the role of authoritarian upgrading in Syria as a ploy to ensure the survival of authoritarianism in Syria but in fact as Hinnebusch argues sets Syria up for its own downfall. Unfortunately, the reforms did not go further to address the real concerns of the Syrian people. The deep-seated problems evident within Syrian society includes; rapid population growth, a large youth bulge, rising unemployment, increasing levels of poverty, large foreign debt and ever growing dissatisfaction with the levels of corruption, and nepotism amongst the ruling elite (Emadi, 2011: 71). The underlying concerns of the Syrian people are similar to those of the Tunisians and similar to those of many across the Arab region. Due to the rise of internet access and social media usage these common frustrations could be communicated and shared.

The state tolerated certain cosmetic reforms but only if they did not pose a threat to the status quo. Even though media restrictions were relaxed and previously banned newspapers were legalised again the regime still strictly controlled the content and did not allow any hostile remarks and criticism of Bashar and his family. According to Emadi there were approximately 4 million internet users in 2010, but this significant number of internet users was irrelevant as the regime blocked any websites that were anti- government or criticized the ruling family (Emadi, 2011: 70-71). The reforms put in place by Bashar when he came to power were nothing but a sham and nothing depicts this more clearly than the short-lived support he declared for civil society organisations. During the first few months of his rule Bashar declared his support for the establishment of civil society organizations and allowed the Syrian

Human Rights Committee (SHRC) to resume its activities after being suppressed since the 1990s. Through doing this he hoped to succeed in distancing himself from the autocratic style of rule that his father used and project himself as a refined and moderate leader. However, just six months later he suppressed the SHRC and arrested its leaders (Emadi, 2011: 71).

Syria was experiencing very similar problems as was evident in Tunisia. The lack of accountability and transparency within the political structures became a major problem as individuals connected to the power structure were immune from prosecution (Emadi, 2011: 71). All these concerns came together at a time when internet and social media allowed Syrians to see what was happening across the region. Overall Syrians had become thoroughly disenchanted with the regime. The people were fed up with having the Alawite minority and the Assad family in control of the country's politics. "The rising cost of living, growing unemployment, rampant bureaucratic corruption, and abuse of power by the ruling Alawis generated greater public dismay as the government failed to carry out the needed reforms it had promised" (Emadi, 2011: 73).

The popular dissent that swept across the Arab world in early 2011 jolted the very foundation of the autocratic system in Syria. "Syrians sensed that events in Tunisia and Egypt had opened a window of opportunity in their country as well. In fact, nothing had changed except the Syrians' own perception of their ability to challenge the regime" (Leenders, 2013: 275). Social media was responsible for showing Syria what was possible and therefore inspired the Syrians to rise up and protest against the long-standing authoritarian regime.

Syria's popular uprising began in March 2011 in the provincial town of Dar'a. The protests grew and spread very quickly throughout Dar'a governorate, and then extended to, firstly, Latakia but foremost Homs, Idlib and Deir az-Zur governorates, which began to witness intense and sustained mobilization. This uprising represents the most serious challenge against Ba'thist authoritarian rule for decades (Leenders, 2013: 274). As protests continued unabated Bashar attempted to take action and respond to protestors' demands but to no avail. He dismissed the governor of Dar'a on 22 March in order to appease the protestors, but the protestors continued to demand freedom and change. As protest demonstrations escalated,

Bashar dismissed the entire government on 29 March and appointed a new prime minister. On 21 April he rescinded the emergency laws that had governed the country since the early 1960s and promised to carry out additional reforms. However, people remained defiant of the regime. State security forces cracked down on the uprising, killing and arresting peaceful protestors (Emadi, 2011: 74). In solidarity with the Dar'a killings, the protests spread and reached the city of Homs in the Northern Province.

Social media provided citizens with the means to share images and comments of the realities of the state's brutality therefore encouraging country wide support. In Homs the regime used artillery and heavy weapons including air strikes to try to suppress the uprising. According to Shehabat, the protesters' only retaliation weapon was YouTube. This gave citizens the power to show the rest of the world what was happening in Syria. The incidents in Dar'a and Homs were recorded and uploaded onto YouTube and other social media and broadcast worldwide (Shehabat, 2012: 2).

It became clear that neither the offering of haphazard reforms nor state violence was going to cause aspirants for change and freedom to abandon their struggle (Emadi, 2011: 74). The violence of the regime has only worsened and even at the time of writing the situation seems dire with Bashar refusing to step down. After examining a brief history of Syria up until the start of the uprisings the final section will examine the role of ICTs and social media a little closer.

The internet was first introduced to Syria in 2000 as part of the modernizing reforms of President Bashar al-Assad. It only reached 30,000 users that year but by the end of 2010, more than one-fifth of the population was online (Freedom House, 2012). Control and censorship of the media is severe. Syria has been unique in its methods to use social media for its own benefits. Syria attempted to harness social media to trap social media activists. This is a fear that was raised by Evgeny Morozov who has argued that the internet and social media also have a negative side that should not be ignored. It is easy to become overly enthusiastic about the possibilities of the internet while ignoring the possibilities for authoritarian regimes to harness social media for its own use to the detriment of the people (Morozov, 2011b). In order to control the flow of information readily available to citizens, the Syrian regime applies sophisticated surveillance technology to identify and eliminate any online activists.

Unlike what happened in Egypt and Tunisia, “the Syrian regime restored the country’s internet connection during the uprisings and left restrictions on Facebook and other social media platforms in a move to trap social media activists and crack down on them” (Shehabat 2012). According to Shehabat, due to Information Communication Technologies being harnessed by both the regime and the revolutionaries there is in fact a cyber-war taking place.

Shehabat (2012) reveals how social media was utilised during the early stages of the uprisings. In Dar’a in 2011, a 13-year-old boy, Hamzeh Alkhateeb, was killed. This event incited international outrage after a YouTube Video showed his tortured body. Syrian activists turned to Facebook, Twitter and other internet tools to broadcast news and information about the uprisings. A Facebook group page was started to spread the word of the revolution called ‘We are all Hamzeh Al-Khateeb’. This page copied the famous Egyptian Facebook page ‘We Are All Khaled Sa’ed’, that had been responsible for initiating the call for protests on 25 January, and which marked an important turning point in Egypt. The power of social media in the early stages of the revolution successfully raised awareness among the majority of the Syrians of the reality of the corruption and brutality of the regime. Facebook revolutionary pages such as ‘The Syrian Revolution 2011’ and ‘Like for Syria’ as well as YouTube videos have exposed the regimes’ brutalities. The use of social media by both the regime as well as the protestors is clear.

Both Freedom House and Reporters without Borders have admonished the Syrian regime harshly for the lack of press and media freedoms evident within the country. The Syrian regime monitors internet use very closely and has detained citizens for expressing their opinions or reporting information against the state online. Internet activists regularly suffered severe harassed, and were detained and tortured. The Syrian regime has implemented stringent filtering and censoring technologies that closely monitor internet content in order to remove anything that could destabilize the regime.

Some of the tactics used by the government have included; “periodic shutdowns of the internet and mobile phone networks, intensified filtering of websites, and various sophisticated means of monitoring and tracking internet users’ online activities” (Freedom House, 2012). According to Freedom House, Syria’s internet freedom

status is not free and is ranked 83/100 (0 being most free and 100 being least free). Syria has also been identified as one of the most dangerous countries in the world for citizen journalists and bloggers, with an untold number arrested and several killed (Freedom House, 2012).

This examination of the case of Syria has revealed the importance of social media to the uprisings that are ongoing. The ICTs infrastructure in Syria is less developed with lower levels of penetration compared to Tunisia. The Syrian regime has also implemented severe controls and filters to monitor the internet. Syrians were inspired by their neighbours to overthrow their repressive regime but have as yet failed to successfully remove Bashar from power.

In both Tunisia and Syria similar socio-economic issues were present namely; high unemployment especially amongst the educated youth, a high cost of living, severe inequality and rampant corruption. Social media helped to publicise these realities to the people inciting them to rise up in protest against the regimes. Both countries experienced strong media censorship with harsh punishment for any dissenters. New media were tools to convey information both internally and externally. Within both countries the protests began in smaller, rural towns and proceeded to spread throughout the country very quickly. Social media were instrumental as communication tools that enabled protests to spread so quickly. This was a result of citizens discovering the truth about the regimes brutality, no longer tolerating the corrupt practices of the regime and finding confidence to participate in protests through discovering fellow people within their network with similar feelings of frustration.

In addition social media has external effects. Social media was utilised as a tool to convey the realities of the regime to the outside world. There was a demonstration or contagion effect present within the region (Bellin, 2012). This was specifically evident in the case of Syria where social media conveyed the news of Ben Ali's withdrawal in Tunisia to the rest of the region. Syrians were now aware of the possibilities of their own power based on what Tunisia had achieved. The Syrian's perception of what was possible had changed (Leenders, 2013).

Social media itself did not initiate or determine the outcome of the demonstrations that took place in Tunisia and Syria and it is important to highlight that it was the

citizens and the result of years of built up frustrations that led to the events witnessed across the region. This project aims to highlight the role played by new media to enable citizens to rise up against strongly entrenched authoritarian regimes. As a tool, it enabled citizens to communicate and coordinate in an interactive new way that was never possible before. It also enabled news to travel out of the country more freely, conveying what was happening to the rest of the region and the world.

## **Chapter 4**

### *Discussion and Conclusion*

Through examining the role of social media in two cases from the recent Arab uprisings (2010-2014) this research project aimed to gain a greater understanding of the role of social media in politics and specifically in what respects they are effective tools for initiating political mobilization and stimulating political change in order to challenge authoritarian regimes. To gain a better understanding of this phenomenon as well as answering the research question re-stated above this project provides a discussion that applies Network Theory to the cases discussed.

Citizens now have a space to communicate and coordinate in a regime where traditional media sources are often controlled and restricted. Social media have been used within Tunisia and Syria to initiate political mobilization in order to stimulate political change. The rise of the internet and social media and their new found use in politics is significant. There are several ways in which this new communication method is affecting political mobilisation. Communication has always been a crucial element to social movements, over time this has taken many forms including pamphlets, manifestos, television and radio. The internet is a new addition to their repertoire and provides some unique elements. This makes social media especially suited to being used by social movements as they rely on a certain degree of communicative autonomy to exist (Castells, 2013: 34).

Castells' Network Theory argues that the emergence of new media has helped to shift the power from the state to the network society. "The power to control information no longer resides exclusively with the institutions of the state; it resides in media networks; and media networks are constituted by social relations and communication technologies" (Allagui & Kuebler, 2011: 1436). Castells is careful not to overstate the power of new media by also asserting its limitations. Through the emergence of mass self-communication social movements have greater autonomy which has enabled them to confront the state on their own terms. Naturally, social movements are not originated by technology, they use technology (Castells, 2007). It

is crucial to remember there is a “difference between the power embedded in mass communication and the autonomous capacity to challenge the political order on the basis of the internet”. Technology cannot solely determine the process and the outcome of the power-making process, but it is in no way neutral. Technology plays an important role in maximising the chances for the protests and mobilisations that have emerged from society to challenge the regime in power (Castells, 2013: 19-20). Castells argues that social movements can utilise mass self-communication to catalyse political change (Meier, 2011: 78).

Throughout history the authority of governments has been maintained by the control of information and communication. At each stage of society’s development new forms of communication have chipped away at the state’s ability to control the flow of information and communication. The development of the printing press was used to challenge authority because feelings of frustration that exist in most individuals can only flourish and spread when they are connected with other individuals with the same feelings. Therefore further developments have added to this process culminating in the current technological revolution. “Free communication is the most subversive practice of all, because it challenges the power relationships embedded in the institutions and organizations of society” (Castells, 2013: 16). Marc Lynch conveys a similar argument with regards to the effects of social media networks and their effects on authoritarian regimes. He states that “...Networked communication fundamentally challenges existing social and political orders, privileging horizontal networks over hierarchical organizations such as the modern nation-state” (Lynch, 2011: 303).

The consequences of these new communication technologies on society have made citizens more powerful to protest against the injustices of authoritarian systems. The core to Castells’ argument is that; “power relationships, the foundation of the institutions that organise society, are largely constructed in people’s minds through communication processes. The shaping of minds is a more decisive and lasting form of domination than the submission of bodies by intimidation or violence” (Castells, 2013: 13). Through earlier analysis of the literature of authoritarian regimes and the methods through which they remain in power it was evident that a large amount of the literature focused on the use of severe repression and violence exerted by the regime that enabled them to maintain control over the people by breeding fear



(Bellin, 2004; Fjelde, 2010). The theory put forward by Castells helps to explain how the technological revolution and the consequent rise in the use of social media has changed the balance of power reducing the power of authoritarian regimes. In fact this can be evident in the recent uprisings and protest across the Arab region. The methods of violent repression are no longer controlling the masses and in some instances have in fact been used against them. It has been this repression that has inspired revolts and uprisings through it being recorded and spread on social media sites.

Several authors have mentioned how social media challenges authoritarian survival. According to Bellin, "...it (social media) is an important new empirical reality that will govern the question of authoritarian resilience from now on" (Bellin, 2012: 139). Lynch states that new media can in fact support contentious collective action even under the constraints of authoritarian rule due to its ability to "reduce transaction costs, nurture informational cascades, foster diffusion and increase the costs of state repression" (Bellin, 2012: 139).

Lynch's research identifies four means through which the new media can be utilised to challenge the power of Arab states, "...by stimulating political mobilization; limiting or enhancing the mechanisms of state repression; affecting international support for the regime; and affecting the overall control of the public sphere" (Lynch, 2011: 304). Network Theory put forward by Castells can be applied to the cases to explain how social media manages to undermine authoritarian control. According to the theory new media have altered the balance of power within societies providing citizens with greater sources of information, as well as the ability to communicate and coordinate with fellow nationals as well as global citizens therefore providing them with greater power. According to Castells information is power (Castells, 2011).

The ubiquitous nature of these new media means that even with the most sophisticated surveillance and censorship technologies it is still difficult for regimes to completely control them. The techniques both the Tunisian and Syrian regimes would normally resort to in order to maintain control would have been to rely on their coercive apparatuses to repress citizens. Due to the rampant use of social media now this method of control is difficult to enforce. Social media has increased the costs of state repression. Images and videos can now travel globally with such ease

that the reality of a regimes' brutality can now be recorded and conveyed to people throughout the country, region and the world. Authoritarian regimes can no longer use their coercive apparatuses to control their citizens without it being conveyed to its citizens world-wide resulting in greater condemnation and protests therefore increasing the costs to the regime making this method of control difficult to use.

Authoritarian regimes use multiple methods in order to remain in power; coercion and co-optation, censorship, and legitimation through traditional or personalistic leadership (Fjelde, 2010; Bellin, 2004; Albrecht & Schlumberger, 2004; Gandhi & Przeworski, 2007). Social media has undermined this power by creating networks of weak ties across society therefore giving citizen's power over the regime which had previously always controlled them. As it became easier to convey information it became harder to stop the flow of knowledge with regards to the realities of the regime.

In the case of both Tunisia and Syria it is evident how the use of social media assisted and mediated the uprisings. In both cases the use of social media was instrumental in communicating the realities of the authoritarian regimes' brutalities to the Tunisian and Syrian people as well as the international world. This built up support from within both countries as well as the rest of the world. In addition social media assisted in coordination amongst citizens to plan and execute street protests and uprisings against the injustices of the regimes they lived under. This happened to a lesser extent in Syria due to the lower penetration of social media and severe censorship and control executed by the authoritarian government. As Tunisia is case-zero the regime was not prepared to repress the protests. Not only had the Syrian people heard of what was happening in Tunisia so had the ruling party therefore enabling them to step up in terms of surveillance, censorship and ensuring the support of the armed forces. The unfailing support the armed forces have pledged to the ruling party in Syria has enabled Assad to remain to power unlike Ben Ali in Tunisia (Bellin, 2012).

Social media was instrumental in conveying the messages of what was happening in Tunisia to the rest of the region. The Tunisian people's success at toppling Ben Ali and the speed at which this news was spread via the social media network to the rest of the MENA region was instrumental at triggering the protests in several other

countries including Syria. As Castells states; “The larger and broader these inputs are, and the faster the speed of their interaction, the more the communication sphere becomes a driver of social change”(Castells, 2013: 17). Social media as inputs have altered the communication landscape across all these elements. Connections cover larger and broader areas and communication takes place at a speed never known before. Tunisia and Syria had both relied on several tactics to remain in power. These were severely undermined due to the technological revolution and the rise of social media.

Social media in Tunisia enabled the Tunisian people to communicate with one another and be inspired by the amount of people online with similar feelings of hate, distrust, fear, frustration and anger towards the regime that provided the confidence to rise up against the regime. Social media reduced transaction costs and encouraged citizens to participate as the ties and networks established online helped build confidence amongst citizens of a common feeling and commitment to protest. Internet access and the use of social media provided the Tunisian people with the power to rise up against the authoritarian regime.

From the examination of literature it is clear that social media are effective tools which can be used to inspire and carry out political mobilisation and change. It is imperative that throughout continued study and analysis of this technology that one does not put too much emphasis on the role of social media. Social media can also be used by the regime to further entrench the authoritarian system. Through surveillance the regime can target bloggers and dissenters who use social media. Both Tunisia and Syria have bad ratings in terms of media freedom and have some of the worst reputations for arresting and detaining journalists and bloggers. Even though social media can be used for positive outcomes it is crucial to remember the dark-side of new media and the alternative uses available to other parties (Morozov, 2011b).

After confirming this caveat we can also not ignore how the technological revolution and specifically the introduction and proliferation of social media such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube have altered the power dynamic within society providing citizens with greater access to information as well as the freedom to decide what to receive and what to share. They also now have the power to generate and spread

their own messages. These three profoundly new dynamics have changed the world of communication. This intense shift is laid out and described in Castells' Network theory about the network society and interplay of communication and power.

It is evident from this analysis of network theory and its application to the cases that the role of social media cannot be ignored when it comes to understanding political mobilisation and political change in authoritarian regimes. "The technology and morphology of these communication networks shape the process of mobilisation, and thus of social changes" (Castells, 2013: 42). Network Theory is therefore a valuable framework to understand in what respects social media are effective tools for initiating political mobilization and stimulating political change in order to challenge authoritarian regimes. This theory clearly shows how the change to the communication landscape marked by the development of internet and social media has changed the power dynamic providing citizens with a tool to initiate political mobilization against authoritarian control.

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